



Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend (MISSOURI BIOGRAPHY SERIES)

By John E. Miller

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Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend (MISSOURI BIOGRAPHY SERIES) By John E. Miller Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Legends have attached themselves to Laura Ingalls Wilder, beloved author of the eight Little House novels, but what are the facts? Fans are familiar with her early pioneer years up to her marriage, at age 19, to Almanzo Wilder. But before this biography, little has been known about her adult years. This detail-packed biography amends that. John E. Miller has availed himself of myriad primary sources--Ingalls Wilder's unpublished autobiography, letters, her newspaper stories, and other documentary materials. Miller's approach is to track her evolution into one of American's most popular children's writers, a formidable challenge, because she left behind little in the way of personal revelation. Published between 1932 and 1943, the Little House novels were immediately seized upon; strangely, Ingalls Wilder did not begin her career as a novelist until she was in her mid-60s.

What happened between the adolescent years, dramatized in her novels, and the period between 1943 and 1957, when she was basking in the glow of her readers' affection? "To write her 'autobiographical' novels," Miller notes, "Wilder needed to undergo a process of becoming, which depended heavily upon the inheritance that she had received both from her family and, across the years, from the various environments in which she lived."

One minor flaw in this otherwise reverent biography is Miller's incredulity that such an ordinary, farm-town woman could become such a famous and sophisticated author. He strains to identify the extraordinary, formative moments--Wilder's various memberships in local political organizations; her apprenticeship as a farm-journal columnist; her relationship with her talented and precocious daughter, Rose. More interesting is his curiosity about how she came to be an independent career woman in a time of limited options for women, in a place (the Ozarks of Missouri) remote, isolated, and tradition bound.

Ingalls Wilder's daughter, the extraordinary Rose Wilder Lane (prominent in the American literary scenes in the 1920s and 1930s), had a major role in the production of her mother's novels. Indeed, the remarkable mother-daughter relationship itself makes the book well-worth reading. Laura would learn to write from her daughter; however Miller argues against the widely held belief that it was Rose Lane's sophisticated writing skills that transformed and polished her mother's novels.

Miller begins with the history of the Ingalls family and their first settlement, which was in Wisconsin along the banks of the Mississippi River. The history unfolds at a sprightly pace and paints the hardscrabble pioneer life in bright colors--the family's search for good farmland that drives them to Missouri; the physical challenges of the prairie; plagues of locusts; the fragile farm economy; and the burgeoning immigrant population. This biography will appeal to readers already hooked by the Little House series and hungry for the facts of Laura Ingalls Wilder's life independent of the myths that grew out of her fiction. --*Hollis Giammatteo*

From Publishers Weekly

It takes Miller one-third of this fact-clogged biography to start showing Laura Ingalls Wilder as "the woman behind the legend," but when he finally does, the picture is fascinating. Wilder, whose seven semiautobiographical Little House on the Prairie books have been read by millions and inspired a television series, was a bossy wife, a penny-pincher who once protested her power company's rates by having her electricity shut off and a political right-winger. By far the most absorbing aspect of Miller's book is the story

of Wilder's relationship with her only child. Rose Wilder Lane was a childless divorcee and an established writer by the time her mother began writing novels at age 63, and she edited her mother's books and got her agent to handle them. Miller draws heavily on Lane's diaries and letters, which often contain diatribes against a mother she alternately loved and resented. But while Wilder left no personal papers presenting her side, Miller seems to paint a balanced portrait. He's not so balanced elsewhere, and in an effort to contextualize his subject, he often presents reams of redundant or unnecessary political, geographical and cultural details that bog down what is otherwise a very interesting story.

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From Kirkus Reviews

A biography of the author of The Little House on the Prairie series that comes to life only in the recounting of the stormy relationship between Wilder and her daughter. Those fictionalized accounts of Wilder's turn-of-the-century girlhood on the rural frontier are accurate both in spirit and largely in fact. The first part of this biography reruns those years in numbing detail, but Miller (History/South Dakota State Univ.) picks up the pace when he begins to examine the controversy about who really wrote the series, Wilder or her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. Rose Lane was an established writer and editor living in San Francisco when she began to encourage her mother to write. Wilder and her husband were then eking out a living on a Missouri farm, and Rose saw her mother's writing as a potential source of income. Wilder began with a series of columns for a local newspaper and finally a manuscript of reminiscence. By then, Rose was living on the Missouri farm and worked closely with her mother to get the book in shape. Rose continued to manage and guide both Wilder's career and subsequent manuscripts so closely, some critics have said, that they were really Rose's books. Drawing on correspondence between mother and daughter and other sources, Miller concludes that Wilder was a talented writer in her own right and that her daughter acted as a skilled editor and writing coach, although rewriting limited sections of her mother's work. Wilder was 65 years old when her first book was published in 1932, 90 when she died, already a favorite of several generations of children. Her daughter died a few years later. Rose emerges as a conflicted and intriguing character, but this biography remains best suited for historians and adults who are still hard-core Wilder fans. (20 illustrations) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

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